The spirit of a movement is often born in the ashes of its antecedent. As weaver spiders masticate their mother in birth, one generation’s ideas and beliefs are the palate of another’s innovations. But unlike weaver spiders, ideas do not simply die. Many are too radical to die, their contents too large for a coffin’s containment, their energy too vital for the casket’s subterranean confinement. Thus, though less influential on culture, their meanings crystallize into paradigms. Like museums that protect a generation’s finest art, scholars impregnate these paradigms with complexity: Enlightenment, Romanticism, Modernity, Postmodernity. Before crystallizing into museums, however, they were movements. Indeed, they would not be “spirits” of an era, unless animated by the presence of something fresh, something meaningful, something divine. And no art reflects this spirit better than poetry. And though history beckons plenty of poets who reflect the spirit of their era, three voices represent three revolutionary imaginations: the prophet Jeremiah, Percy Shelley, and Wallace Stevens.

On the one hand, these poets seem somewhat mismatched. And, indeed, when viewed from afar, they certainly are: Jeremiah, a Hebrew prophet, Shelley, a Romantic atheist, Stevens, a skeptical Modernist. On the other hand, they do share a common purpose. For what unites these poets not dogma, nor poetics, nor ideology but an insistent desire to renew meaning in a context of conflict. From Jeremiah’s opposition against the royal powerhouses of Jerusalem, from Shelley’s arguments against England’s politics and dehumanization, from Wallace Stevens’ turn from stale religious dogma and post-World War trauma, conflict bred imagination. Not without irony, they saw something wrong with their realities. Not without metaphor, they created something new. And this revitalizing impulse, this revolutionary spirit, can be called the radical imagination.

Though it can refer to an advocacy of political or social reform, “radical” refers to a thing’s roots, its fundamental nature. When it qualifies imagination,
then, radical implies *re-imagining the fundamental essence of reality, which often implies questioning the divine*. To the poets who foster this radical imagination, life is vital, pulsating with as much meaning as a child’s first taste of sugar. Yet the outerwear—the dogma, the tradition, the words that once imbued reality with meaning—has degenerated. It has become immoral, fixated, static, unable to move meaning into sentient beings. Consequently, the radical imagination challenges the dogma that needs changing, the traditions that need renewal, the words that need regeneration. “If no new poets,” says Shelley in his *Defense*, “should arise to create afresh the associations which have been thus discovered language will be dead to all nobler purposes in humans….” “Newness (not novelty) may be the highest individual value in poetry,” says Stevens. “Even in the meretricious sense of newness a new poetry has value” (*Adagia* 975). And Yahweh tells Jeremiah: “Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant” (*ESV* Jer. 1:10).

In many ways, the radical imagination is similar to what theologian Walter Brueggemann calls the *prophetic* imagination. Prophets challenged complacent and idolatrous priests and kings by imagining “alternative worlds” that could adequately replace their ideologies (44-45). These new worlds were informed by God, and through them, God ironically challenged the priests’ dominant paradigms. And while certainly one should not doubt Brueggemann’s influence on this paper, one should not define it by him, either. For, in many ways, the prophetic differs from the radical as the eyepiece from its telescope: the telescope gives structure; the eyepiece, depth. The eyepiece varies—*prophetic, Romantic, Modernist*—but the structure stays the same: to deconstruct an oppressive and life-sucking paradigm by reconstructing something new, leading to a strange kind of love. And as an eyepiece limits one’s sight to expand his vision, so, too, one’s context enables a creative use of the radical imagination.

The radical imagination, then, unifies these poets. But one mustn’t turn from their significant differences. For each poet reveals a shift in poetic vitality, shifts that in many ways hint at the twenty-first century context. For though the poets had one major task—to transfix reality in order to change it—their perception of the divine differed. Indeed, one may say that the revitalizing impulse, the human need for divine contact, remained the same throughout; but the vehicle that delivered this impulse depended on the context. To see this, however, one must recognize the radical imagination that turned their vitality, their spiritual desires, their metaphysical speculations into poetry. Thus, this paper has four parts. Since it implies both *dismantling and rebuilding*, the radical imagination will first be framed through Vico’s four stages of a nation’s development. In light of this, it will contextualize Jeremiah, a radical poet who renewed God’s covenant in the midst of Jerusalem’s destruction. From there, it will examine Shelley’s radical poetics, paying close attention to his skeptical idealism and, using Freire’s *Pedag...
gogy of the Oppressed, exhuming his nonviolent revolutionary ideals. And lastly it will move closer to the contemporary era by discovering Stevens' grand paradox, the supreme fictions. In the end, the radical imagination will be shown as a critical consciousness that dismantles oppressive orders and a revitalizing imagination that rebuilds meaning where it was lost.

The Radical Imagination: Vico and the Interplay of Metaphor, Irony, and Paradox

Whenever one uses an adjective to qualify his imagination, as in the moral or sociological imagination, he seems indirectly to constrain its creative power. For the word determines the function, if not the content, of such an imagination. Thus, it may seem self-defeating to prescribe radical to the imagination, to say, in effect, that the imagination is most creative where it is most unpredictable, most antagonistic, most unconventional. To prescribe it, yes. To suggest it, however, is a different argument. For the radical imagination is not a prescription for all imaginations to follow, but an observation of how poets have used their imaginations to respond to spiritual disintegration and disillusionment.

Disintegration, however, cannot exist without unity preceding it. A stage, phase, step must exist between unity and a collapse that follows. And nobody expresses this better than Giambattista Vico. Vico, as James M. Edie says, “is one of those thinkers whom everyone can read with profit, in whom everyone finds some element of contemporary thought embodied or foreshadowed. In short, every philosophical ‘ism’ since the eighteenth century…after proclaiming its own originality, has found itself confronted with Vico” (483). Thus, in Vico’s four stages of a nation’s development (birth, growth, empire, and fall), one discovers where the radical imagination functions best: in the transition from irony to paradox, from disillusionment to renewal.

While Vico’s stages relate nations to their destruction, one can, as Stephen Bonnycastle does, relate the stages to the growth of an individual’s mind. Either way, they start in “the age of the gods.” This is the birth of nations, the newness of an individual’s experience, the beginning of an innovation. Persons in this stage are “theological poets,” who experience life’s wonder with life’s greatest spirit. They are enamored by something, emotionally involved, undoubting of life’s supremacy. They live in a perpetual metaphor: all old experience is related to the new, and the new supersedes the old in exciting ways (Bonnycastle 141).

Yet wanderlust that never ends is a Peter Pan-like mind that never grows. Inevitably, a mind ignited by passion is a mind searching for the causes of its infatuation. “The human mind,” says Vico, “naturally tends to take delight in what is uniform” (92). Thus, as the mind moves from stage one to two, it simultaneously moves from experiencing situations to making sense of them. Like a metonymy, which habitually associates words close together, persons in stage two replace adventure with logic. In other words, experience is no longer enough; the mind
needs information to continue growing. As Bonnycastle puts it, “metonymy usually carries less emotional intensity than metaphor. This is partly because metonymy depends on how things are located in the real world, and often their location is arbitrary or accidental” (142). This Vico calls “the age of heroes,” the age when certain charismatic persons call attention to life’s disorder. Claiming to know things, these heroes arrange reality for others to analyze; consequently, people depend on them for answers.

But the mind is not always satisfied with heroes. When it’s not, it desires its own expertise. And since the second stage does not enable the expert to emerge, he must emerge himself. The heroes merely gave him something to ponder, but not the power to master. Consequently, the mind that desires mastery moves from analysis to synthesis. If the first stage was satisfied with the new, and the second stage satisfied with the details, the third stage is satisfied with a system. As *synecdoches*, which use parts for the whole, persons in this stage integrate and build elaborate networks of thought. “In stage 3,” writes Stephen Bonnycastle, “you shift to an integrative and idealizing mode of thought: you are interested in discovering the essence or core of a thing, institution, or person. You try to move from outward appearances to the inner reality that generates them” (140).

Systems, however, inevitably end. For all systems follow the second law of thermodynamics. That is, a system that exerts tremendous energy will, in turn, lose its original potency. Assyria, Babylon, Greece, Rome: these nations ended in destruction, and Vico sees systems ending in a likewise pattern. Vico calls this the era of *irony*. As Harmon and Holman define it, irony refers to “the recognition of a reality different from appearance” (282). Often when this recognition happens, disenchchantment follows. Thus, Stephen Bonnycastle calls this the “stage of disillusionment,” when “you realize that your understanding is based on certain assumptions, or certain arbitrary features of your own life, which you thought were universal. Now you suspect, or know, that they are not universal, and so your understanding is fundamentally flawed and incomplete” (143). Unlike the previous stages, the fourth stage always implies conflict. Something invades the system—a flaw, a virus, a barbarian. In consequence, the invasion destroys the system—war, revolution, violence. The internal struggle causes a collapse: Rome sacked by barbarians, Assyria sacked by Babylon, Enlightenment sacked by Postmodernity, Romanticism sacked by the World Wars. For Vico, and for nations, destruction always leads back to the first stage, a *ricorso*, in his terms. The barbarians, now the champions, reinstitute the cycle. The cycle, then, repeats. In his creative interpretation, Bonnycastle suggests something similar: “What comes after stage 4?... the individual who has reached stage 4 may then start a *ricorso*, or a reoccurrence of the cycle, which leads to stage 1 in another field of activity.” In other words, if one becomes disillusioned with Christianity, he can renew his mind by pursuing something else, like psychology or basketball or Buddhism.

What if, however, one didn’t leave one field of activity for another? Could
a learner renew his love, his passion, for something that once preoccupied his life? Certainly, vitality could come from conflict leading to newness, but not necessarily to an era of primitivism, as Vico’s first stage implies, or a change in subject matter, as Bonnycastle suggests. Like an exile returning home, one can proceed to a fifth stage, an era of renewal and reconciliation. In other words, when leaders fail, when certain fundamental truths crumple, when God appears dead, a re-imagining of divine reality is vital. Consequently, the flaws and ironies perceived in the fourth carry over and are addressed in the fifth. If the first stage was the age of metaphor, and if the fourth was the era of irony, the fifth must be paradox. As the Norton Anthology’s glossary defines it, a paradox is “an apparent contradiction that requires thought to reveal an inner consistency” (A20). On the surface, paradoxes have two or more conflicting voices, but, underneath, a single unifying chord resounds.

As “radical” implies discovering something’s roots, the radical imagination discovers this unifying chord, despite the conflict that shrouds it. Thus, not only does it uncover, but it also enhances life with a revitalizing interpretation of it. As a paradox, in Greek, means “contrary to received opinion,” so, too, this new reality diverges from the old. Thus, one finds the new covenant in Jeremiah, the skeptical idealism of Shelley, the “supreme fictions” of Stevens, for behind the radical imagination’s impulse is a strange desire for unity.

**The Prophetic Imagination: The New Covenant and Hesed**

If the radical imagination implies conflict, then, indeed, Jeremiah’s context fits perfectly. And if the radical imagination forecasts an unconventional future, then Jeremiah’s new covenant clearly qualifies. As a prophet whose prophetic imagination foresaw the end of Jerusalem, as a radical whose critical consciousness challenged the religious establishment on this notion, Jeremiah anticipated the year—587 B.C., the year the Lord unleashed the brutes, Babylon. Knowing this, Jeremiah was both overwhelmed with grief (Jer. 4:19–21) and determined to foretell the arrival of this destruction (Jer. 6:1–5). But where the prophet saw a broken and faithless community, the priests saw unity and national pride. “They have spoken falsely of the Lord and have said, ‘He will do nothing; no disaster will come upon us, nor shall we see sword of famine’” (ESV Jer. 5:12). Where Jeremiah saw oppression of the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widows, the priests saw blessings from “the temple of the Lord” (Jer. 7:1–5). Throughout the book of Jeremiah, then, the prophet countered the priests’ royal fantasies with strange figures of speech and dismantling ironies. These ironies against the royal establishment and Jeremiah’s metaphoric articulation of them, undergrad Jeremiah’s radical imagination: renewing hope in Yahweh’s covenant amid Jerusalem’s destruction.

The book of Jeremiah is not easy to handle. As Stephen Winward says, “except in a few places, the messages of the prophet are not arranged according to subject or sequence. The prophecy appears to be a confused jumble” (121). If one wants to see Jeremiah’s radical imagination in action, he must discover the
prophet’s context. And when Jeremiah’s prophecy is looked at as a whole, three contextual forces constantly rub against it: 587 B.C., Babylonian domination, and the royal paradigm.

Although much of his literature was written before 587, Jeremiah’s poetry portrayed the imminent danger of this year: “Behold he comes up like clouds; his chariots like the whirlwind; his horses swifter than eagles” (ESV Jer. 4:13-14). “A leopard lurks round their towns: whoever goes out is torn to pieces” (The Jerusalem Bible 5:6). “Hew down her trees; cast up a siege mound against Jerusalem. This is the city which must be punished; there is nothing but oppression within her” (Oxford Annotated Bible Jer. 6:6). But who was coming to destroy Judah? Two enemies. First, Babylon. When Jeremiah entered his ministry, Assyria was exiting its last Viconian stage: their great ruler, Ashurbanipal, died, and without a powerful leader to succeed him, new forces swiftly sacked Assyria (Winward 110). Cyaxares (king of Media), Nabopolassar, (king of Babylon), and the Scythians allied and assaulted Nineveh, destroying it in 612 B.C. But with the death of Nineveh came the birth of Babylon, a nation far more destructive, far more vicious, far more cruel than their Assyrian counterpart. And as the Babylonian beast brooded over the ancient world, its claws captured the nations it discovered. Slowly, silently, yet certainly, the beast approached Jerusalem (Winward 124-125).

To be fair, Jeremiah was unaware of this global power shift. But he knew something was going on. “Out of the north, disaster shall be let loose” (ESV Jer. 1:16). As Stephen Winward makes clear, “The north was a perpetual symbol of the threat to Israel’s integrity and well-being, and the use of it enables Jeremiah to employ a greater variety of language than could be applied to any one invader” (125). But one thing was certain: the north’s approach was not without reason. For the second enemy was ironically the city’s founder: God. “Yahweh says this: I have been preparing a disaster for you, I have been working out a plan against you. So now, each one of you, turn back from your evil ways, amend your conduct and actions” (The Jerusalem Bible Jer. 18:11). This disaster, Babylon, was God’s beast, sent not just to destroy a city of apostate children, but to reverse the noetic effects of what Walter Brueggemann calls the royal consciousness.

“By the time of Solomon in 962,” writes Brueggemann in The Prophetic Imagination, “there was a radical shift in the foundations of Israel’s life and faith” (30). When Solomon became king, he secured his dynasty by replacing Moses’s counter-cultural consciousness with a three-fold mindset: gather wealth, establish a class system, and fasten religious doctrine around this system (Prophetic Imagination 41). When Solomon died, the priests and prophets perpetuated this new consciousness by espousing an “establishment” theology: God chose Israel’s dynasty; by virtue of God’s choice, the dynasty would continue forever (Prophetic Imagination 42-43). Jerusalem’s royal politics were thus unchallenged, and all oppression, evils, and injustices were “hidden” from the public consciousness. “They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is
no peace” (ESV Jer. 8:11). The Jerusalem Bible makes this hiddenness more clear: “They dress my people’s wound without concern: “Peace! Peace! they say, but there is no peace” (8:11). Thus, with a future as secure as the fixation of the stars, the royal consciousness produced illusions in the people: seeing no danger from the north, no challenge from God, and no threat from Jeremiah, Judah lived in complacency.

But Jeremiah was a threat, precisely because he was a radical. “Jeremiah knew long before the others that the end was coming, and that God had had enough of indifferent affluence, cynical oppression, and presumptive religion. He knew that the freedom of God had been so grossly violated (as in Gen. 2-3) that death was at the door and would not pass over” (Prophetic Imagination 51). And with his contextual forces dialoguing together—Babylonians, empowered by God, coming to destroy Jerusalem and its royal elite—Jeremiah’s poetry developed an ironic disposition (Holladay 47). Although irony usually means “saying one thing and meaning another,” the irony in Jeremiah has a peculiar function: as Vico’s fourth stage implies, irony disassembles ideology. For Jeremiah’s ironies simultaneously convey two or more conflicting ideas, ideas that uncover the wrong in the right, the error in the truth, the danger in the peace. Likewise, Jeremiah’s irony functions as a dismantling device (Holladay 47). And as series circuits light up together, a common irony generates much of Jeremiah’s poetry: the false prophets’ theological words calmed and soothed the nation, yet they simultaneously provoked destruction and disorder from the God that supposedly breathed them. This can be called the irony of the sovereign: the royal establishment believed their future fixed and blessed, while the founder of that establishment—God—believed otherwise: “And when these people, either a prophet or a priest, ask you, ‘What is the Burden of Yahweh?’ you are to answer, ‘You are the burden of Yahweh; yes, you and I mean to be rid of you! It is Yahweh who speaks” (The Jerusalem Bible Jer. 23:33).

When juxtaposed, two poems manifest the irony of the sovereign: Judah’s cry to God during a famine (Jer. 14:1-15:3), and Jeremiah’s indictment on Judah’s unrepentant heart (Jer. 5:20-31). Though anthologized before the former, the latter poem (Jer. 5:20-31) was likely composed later, close to 587, while the former poem (Jer. 14:1-15:3) was composed closer to the beginning of Jeremiah’s ministry (Leslie 107-109). In his earlier poetry, God’s judgment on Judah depends on Judah’s willingness to repent. At this point, however, all of Judah has rejected Jeremiah’s prophecy. God’s judgment, then, is inevitable (Chisholm 160). Rather than speaking against the prophets (Jer. 23:9-22) or the priests (Jer. 7:1-8:3), Jeremiah speaks to all the people (Leslie 109).

Hear this, O’ foolish and senseless people
Who have eyes, but see not
Who have ears, but hear not
Do you not fear me? declares the Lord
Do you not tremble before the Lord? (ESV Jer. 5:21).

Clearly, Jeremiah points to the people’s blindness and deafness to his prophetic word. But something deeper exists. For one, note Jeremiah’s audience: “foolish and senseless people.” The people are numbed to Jeremiah’s poetry, for the unrepentant would change if they believed in that which threatened them (Hopeful Imagination 44). But the priests’ and prophets’ insistence on “peace,” “peace,” “peace” has desensitized everyone: eyes are glazed and ears are dead to the reality of danger. Thus, God must ask “Do you not fear me? Do you not tremble before the Lord?” The implied answer, of course, is no.

An appalling and horrible thing
Has happened in the land:
The prophets prophesy falsely,
And the priests rule at their direction
My people love to have it so (ESV Jer. 5:30-31).

The irony of the sovereign has emerged: belief in “peace” precludes God’s presence. Thus, one thing is clear: Jeremiah’s religious audience is in a spiritual wasteland. The wordplay on “heart” communicates this effectively. “Senseless” can also mean “heartless” (Exile and Homecoming 67-68). They are without heart, for they are without God. What heart they have left only perpetuates the problem: “But this people has a stubborn and rebellious heart” (Jer. 5:23). The priests, then, are stuck in their ideology, which simultaneously keeps the people in a similar mind.

“They do not say in their hearts,
‘Let us fear the Lord our God,’
who gives the rain in its season,
the autumn rain and the spring rain,
And keeps for us the weeks appointed for the harvest” (ESV Jer. 5:24).

For anyone familiar with Jeremiah, the mention of rain reinforces the irony. For in an earlier poem (recorded in Jer.14:1-15:3), titled “concerning the drought,” Jeremiah uses the absence of rain to manifest Judah’s empty repentance. This poem remarkably intertwines three opposing voices: the people of Judah, God, and Jeremiah. First, Jeremiah reports the desperate situation. “Judah mourns, and her gates languish; her people lament on the ground, and the cry of Jerusalem goes up” (ESV Jer. 14:2). Even the royal elite, who had large cisterns filled with fresh water, are affected by the threat of scarcity. “The nobles send the lesser men for water, they come to the cisterns, and find no water, and return with their pitch-
ers empty” (The Jerusalem Bible Jer. 14:3). Subsequently, all of Judah “repents” to God: “If our crimes are witness against us, then, Yahweh, for your name’s sake act! Yes, our apostasies have been many, we have sinned against you!” (The Jerusalem Bible Jer. 14:7). The people, now fearing the drought’s threat to their welfare, question God: “Why should you be like a man confused, like a mighty warrior who cannot save?” (ESV Jer. 14:8).

The irony, of course, is in Judah’s inconsistency. In the presence of “peace, “peace,” “peace,” the people “do not say in their hearts, ‘Let us fear the Lord our God” (Jer. 5:24). They are content and secure. But in the absence of rain—in other words, the threat to their welfare—the people change their attitudes. They become repentant, sorrowful, responsive. They appeal to God, remind him of his covenant, hold him responsible for his failure to act. “Why should you be like a stranger in the land, like a traveler who turns aside to tarry for the night?” (ESV Jer. 14:9). The drought, then, shows not their faith but their insecurities. Thus, God can respond, “They have loved to wander thus; they have not restrained their feet” (ESV Jer. 14:10). The “wandering” and “shifting of feet” arises from a desire to regain security, which would, in effect, diminish their fear of God. Therefore, underneath their groans, their repentance, their prayers, is not a “pure heart,” but the royal ideology: their hearts are still, like the earlier poem, desensitized.

Since Jeremiah composed these two poems before 587, the people failed to understand the irony of the sovereign. Only after God’s words were historically realized did the people realize the iniquity in their hearts and the distortion in their minds. Thus, to sharpen his insights, Jeremiah enhanced his irony in new metaphors. In Jeremiah’s poetry, these metaphors did more than compare. As Brueggemann says, “the poet wants us to re-experience the present world under a different set of metaphors, and [he] want us to entertain an alternative world not yet visible” (Hopeful Imagination 24). Indeed, with his radical imagination ignited, his metaphors become vehicles: like the Trojan horse, metaphors shroud the dismantling irony. As I.A. Richards suggests, one can split a metaphor into its image and its idea: the idea empowers the image, while the image conveys the idea’s power (Harmon and Holmon 321). In many ways, radical ideas create new images, and for Jeremiah, the chasm between God’s thoughts and the priests’ ideology stimulated such images. One sees this in Jeremiah’s symbolic actions, which used everyday objects to represent the irony of the sovereign: a decayed loincloth symbolizing Judah’s decayed heart (Jer. 13:1-11), a potter reshaping clay symbolizing God reshaping Judah’s history and ideology (Jer. 18:1-11), a broken flask symbolizing the fall of Jerusalem (Jer. 19:1-15), a yoke around Jeremiah’s neck symbolizing Judah’s captivity and exile (Jer. 27:1-22).

What symbolic action did in air and breath, however, poetry did in scroll and ink: using old images in striking ways, Jeremiah’s verse re-imagined theological reality and simultaneously addressed the irony of the sovereign. “It is always a practice of such prophetic poetry to break the conventions in which we habituate
God. The dulled God of the conventional religious tradition will never yield energy for ministry” (*Hopeful Imagination* 15). And though Jeremiah scatters these metaphors all over his literature, the poetry in Jeremiah 13 shows this well.

In one of the most arresting images, Jeremiah writes, “Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil” (*ESV* Jer. 13:23). Contextualize this metaphor and one will discover its blunt force: the rituals, sacrifices, and ceremonies of the priests did not help the poor man receive his food. In other words, evil was so structured in the people’s minds, good deeds only had the appearance of good (*Exile and Homecoming* 133). Consequently, God will “scatter” Israel like desert winds to chaff, a clear prophesy of their coming exile. As a woman experiences pangs while giving birth, so, too, Judah’s pain will be swift, sudden and unexpected (Jer. 13:21). Unlike the woman, however, Judah cannot be proud of its conception. For not a child is born, but the fruit of their iniquity is discovered (Jer. 13:22). Though they called good what was really oppressive and dehumanizing, God will uncover all their shameful actions. “I myself will lift up your skirts over your face, and your shame will be seen.” (Jer. 13:26). Naked, vulnerable, and exposed, Judah will finally perceive the massive irony of their royal iniquity. Destruction will reveal their weakness. “Woe to you, O Jerusalem! How long will it be before you are made clean?” (*ESV* Jer. 13:27). The implicit answer: 587. That’s when.

Though these images arrest the royal ideology, Jeremiah’s most profound metaphor is the new covenant. Indeed, in the previous poems, Jeremiah used metaphors to make God’s wrath a reality. But in the new covenant, something new arose, something akin to love.

Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people (*ESV* Jer. 31:31-33).

First, notice the difference between the old and new covenant. As Wilber Wallis argues in his article “Irony in Jeremiah’s Prophecy of a New Covenant,” the old and new differ as a buck from a stag; in other words, *not very much*. Both covenants involve the same three components: (1) God’s law in the heart (Deut. 6:6-7), (2) Israel becoming God’s people and God becoming Israel’s God (Gen. 17:7), and (3) the forgiveness of sins (Ex. 34: 6-7; Wallis 107). In fact, the new covenant is a profound statement of irony:
For here the force of irony—for such it is—is compressed, that the most simple, easily discernible and basic features of spiritual religion are said to be features of a new covenant, as if there could be or need be another covenant beside the one covenant made with Abraham and reiterated at Sinai….in Jeremiah’s prophecy the very commonplaceness, the familiarity, the banality of the oft-repeated words all become the leverage to drive home the stinging irony of the words ‘new covenant’—all this ‘new’ to complacent sinners who thought it was theirs all the while” (Wallis 108).

But one cannot be too reductionistic about Jeremiah’s new covenant. Surely, a difference exists. In fact, the resemblance between the old and the new can be explained through Vico. Like Vico’s cycles, the death of an ideology signals the birth of something new. But this newness does not imply an ex nihilo creation; in other words, the new and the old are not radically different. Between the new covenant and the old covenant, then, one key distinction exists: the new covenant made God real again. “The distinction of the New Covenant, therefore, is that it provides the conditions which make fellowships with God real” (Skinner 329). Thus, the new covenant sought to reconcile society with the metaphysical embodiment of its highest principles, God. Ironically, when the temple fell, God’s relationships were restored. Jeremiah knew this: he knew his world was coming to an end, knew the judgment was real, knew exile was inevitable. And in spite of this—when he could easily slip into apathy, cynicism, or assimilation—Jeremiah imagined a reality utterly different than the reality at hand: God wouldn’t reinvent the covenant; he would renew it in the midst of conflict (Hopeful Imagination 14).

The grand paradox, then, was a strange form of love: by ending the temple, God reconciled his people to himself (Skinner 321). Though he does not speak directly to Jeremiah’s poetry, theologian Paul Tillich drew a similar conclusion: “Life is being in actuality and love is the moving power of life…[therefore] Love manifests its greatest power there where it overcomes the greatest separation…Love reunites that which is self-centered and individual” (25-26). In other words, love is the reconciliation of the utterly estranged. Separation was a noetic effect of Judah’s royal consciousness; thus, by destroying that consciousness, Jeremiah says, God reconciles with his people. The Hebrew word for this kind of love is hesed. “There is no accurate translation of hesed,” says professor of theology, Bernard Brady. “Biblical translators have used love, loving kindness, mercy, steadfast love, devotion, faithfulness, and loyalty for this Hebrew word” (2-3). In any case, the word implies a “faithful, committed love expressed in concrete actions” (Brady 8).

Thus says the Lord:‘The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; when Israel sought for rest, The Lord appeared to him from far away.
I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness [hesed] to you’ (ESV Jer. 31:4).

In Jeremiah, *hesed* is used to renew the people’s relation to God, a word that strongly resembles a *new marriage*. “The marriage metaphor rises naturally in such a situation (note the address to Israel in the feminine in v. 4). The Lord stresses a continuity between the present and prior experiences of the people with the Lord” (Miller 809). What one sees in this metaphor is the culmination of Jeremiah’s ministry: Jeremiah revitalized, *renewed*, the faith of the Hebrews. The book of Jeremiah is difficult to tackle, but in the end, his radical poetry—seen literally in irony, metaphor, and paradox—formed a new cultural vision: the new covenant.

**The Romantic Imagination: Skeptical Idealism and Empathy**

Imagine Jeremiah in a room talking with Percy Shelley. With their contextual and theological differences, one may assume arguments and misunderstandings. And yet to make that assumption is to miss the rich tradition, the radical imagination, these two share. For, like Jeremiah, Shelley lived in a time of turmoil: the aftermath of the French Revolution and the ongoing changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution (“The Romantic Period” 7-8). And like Jeremiah, Shelley wrote poetry in response to these crises, not as an elegy, but as a radical recasting of the ideals that failed in France. Both faced opposition, both were rejected, yet both fought for reform. Shelley devoted his short life to this end, as he says in his preface to *Prometheus Unbound*: “Let this opportunity be conceded to me of acknowledging that I have, what a Scotch philosopher characteristically terms, ‘a passion for reforming the world’” (796). As in Jeremiah’s poetry, Shelley’s radical imagination expressed itself in the three Viconian stages, the three literary tropes of irony, metaphor, and paradox. Thus, fostered by the French Revolution and the English counter-revolution that followed, Shelley’s radical imagination combined irony and metaphor to create his skeptical idealism, an attitude that led to a profound paradox, symbolized in the Prometheus of *Prometheus Unbound*: to affirm empathy and nonviolence amid dehumanization and insurrection.

As Jeremiah lived through 587, so, too, Shelley lived after the French Revolution, after July 14, 1789, the storming of the Bastille. Indeed, as one letter to Byron shows, Shelley viewed the French Revolution as “the master theme of the epoch in which we live” (“The Revolution Controversy” 183). The French Revolution was not, however, an Elysian field of inspiration. Although it dismantled the French government, the Revolution was far from a glorious assent to global reform. The storming of the Bastille was a quick drizzle compared to the Reign of Terror and the thunderous claps of Robespierre’s guillotine. The French invasion of Switzerland, the rise and fall of Napoleon’s armies, and the restoration of France’s monarchy, made the Revolution seem more like a violent distraction to ordinary
life (“The Romantic Period.” 5-7). Indeed, Shelley himself showed contempt for the Revolution’s aftermath. As Hope says to the Manchester victims in *The Mask of Anarchy*:

Thou are Peace—never by thee
Would blood and treasure wasted be
As tyrants wasted them, when all
Leagued to quench thy flame in Gaul (238-241)

If, then, the Revolution ended so horribly, how could it be the “master theme” of Shelley’s era? How could it foster Shelley’s radical imagination? As many critics have pointed out, the revolution became for Shelley a symbol of dual-significance (McNiece 266-267). On the one hand, the Revolution shaped his *ideals* of “justice, wisdom, peace, liberty, and love (The Mask of Anarchy 230-250), as well as “equality, diversity, unity, contrast, mutual dependence” (*A Defense of Poetry* 857), that undergirded his poetics, indeed, all his works. On the other hand, the Revolution warned Shelley of the violence, of the deaths, of the redoubled oppression that could follow. In other words, the Revolution fostered what many call Shelley’s *skeptical idealism*, that is, his “hopes for radical social and political reform that he retained even at a historical moment that seemed (with the restoration of the old autocratic monarchies after 1815, with the suffering of the poor in the economic depression that followed the end of the war) to have delivered an insurmountable setback to the cause of liberty” (“Percy Bysshe Shelley” 750).

Shelley, then, was not an anachronistic supporter of the French Revolution, nor was he merely an idealist. He was optimistic, sure, but he was not, as Matthew Arnold declared of him, “a beautiful and ineffectual angel beating in the void his luminous wings in vain” (“Percy Bysshe Shelley” 751). To pronounce this is to miss the irony, the skepticism, and the image of the failed Revolution motivating Shelley’s visionary poetics. As C.E. Pulo says, “Skepticism….often leads to some kind of faith. In Shelley’s case, it led to faith in the essential soundness of his already active passion for reforming the world” (3454). And, thus, while shaped by the guiding force of idealism, Shelley remained skeptical toward, not just the violence of revolution, but the politics and economy of England. Like the royal establishment in Jerusalem, the English aristocracy were, as he puts it in his poem “England in 1819,” “leechlike to their fainting country:”

An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying King;
Princes, the old dregs of their dulled race, who flow
Through public scorn,—mud from a muddy spring;
Rulers who neither see nor feel nor know (1-4).

As the rhetoric of revolution wafted to England’s shores, Parliament
toughened its policies and numbed its laws (Simpson 49-50). Brutal, hard, and afraid of an English counterpart to France’s disaster, lawmakers terminated any reform (“The Romantic Period” 6-8). As David Simpson says, “the image of the French Revolution, frequently cast as the result of the delusions of theorists and metaphysicians, seems to have functioned to strengthen prejudices and predispositions that were already in place” (66). Meanwhile, the people were unrepresented in Parliament. As Shelley says in one of his political pamphlets, these people were “at the mercy” of demagogues who “had no mercy” (“A Proposal for Putting Reform to the Vote Throughout the Kingdom”). With machines replacing farmers, with the lower class’ voice eclipsed by “the privileged and predatory classes,” with the “widespread misery and oppression” becoming worse, Shelley channeled his skeptical idealism, his radical belief in hope, through his poetry. Indeed, in “Ozymandias,” this attitude is deftly displayed through its unities and disunities:

I met a traveller from an antique land,  
Who said—“Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert….Near them, on the sand,  
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;  
And on the pedestal, these words appear:  
‘My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,  
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!’  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.”

For one, notice how Ozymandias is introduced. Except for the title, and the inscription, Ozymandias is relatively absent. Compared to other poems, such as The Mask of Anarchy, “England in 1819,” and “To Sidmouth and Castlereagh,” where Shelley uses tough metaphors and satire to call out the vices of politicians and tyrants, Ozymandias is hardly the subject of bitter rebuke. One may think of The Mask of Anarchy, where Murder, Fraud, and Hypocrisy, dressed like Castlereagh, Eldon, and Sidmough respectively, ride horses in a masque, feed human hearts to dogs, and crush children with millstones and horses’ hooves. In lieu of such explicit critique, the poet presents the tyrant through two pieces of his statue: the two legs and the shattered visage. But as in Vico’s fourth stage, Ozymandias is a shattered structure. One is introduced, then, not to a system, but to the aftermath of that system, to the death and destruction of a tyrant.

These conclusions—that Ozymandias represents both a system of power
and the inevitable destruction of that system—appear as a unity in the sonnet. Together, they represent Shelley’s optimism toward poetry: “The most unfailing herald, companion, and follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution, is Poetry” (A Defense of Poetry 868). But because Ozymandias is present through the sculpture, several tensions exist in the relations among art and tyranny. Indeed, the poem is not as unified as one may think, and the disunity simultaneously suggests Shelley’s carefulness toward art’s effectiveness.

For one, notice the four voices within the sonnet: the poet, the traveller (storyteller), Ozymandias, and the sculptor. In terms of Shelley’s Defense, three of these are artists, one the tyrant. Furthermore, each artist expresses something different about the function of art in tyranny. Indeed, the traveller’s tale seems to articulate two ideas at once. With the play on “mocked” in the phrase “the hand that mocked them,” and with the sonnet’s conclusion, “nothing beside remains,” the traveller seems hopeful toward the function of art in society. Thus, the traveller seems to say:

In the desert, Ozymandias’ statue is a wreck. Two legs remain, and so does a face with a frown, a wrinkled lip, and a sneer. You’ll notice the Pharaoh’s tyranny and cruelty merely by observing his face. The sculptor did a fine job with this, interpreting Ozymandias’ cruel heart and injecting his interpretation into his art. You’ll also notice that the sculpture is all that remains, despite the Pharaoh’s ironic words. The art outlived the tyranny, the statue outlived its representation, the artist outlived his patron. Art, indeed, deconstructs tyranny. In other words, Ozymandias’ physical absence dismantles his power in the sculpture. But while one can argue for this interpretation, one cannot deny the ambiguity inherent in the traveller’s language, especially in the phrase “which yet survive.” Exactly what is surviving, the sculptor’s ironic attitude toward the Pharaoh, or Ozymandias’ cruel passions? If the latter interpretation is favored, which is entirely plausible considering such passions are “stamped on these lifeless things,” then the traveller seems to say something quite contrary to the first:

In the desert, you’ll find Ozymandias’ statue. Despite the Pharaoh’s death, these two legs stand. In fact, although the sculptor captured the Pharaoh’s tyranny, and although he mocked this tyrant by the cold face and the suggestive sneer, the sculpture ironically perpetuates the Pharaoh’s existence. In fact, the Pharaoh’s cruel passions still survive, since the sculptor has stamped them on these lifeless stones, imputed such cruelty into an innocent medium. Because of this statue, all observers will be reminded of Ozymandias, the King of Kings, whose works have indeed outlived their maker.

In this way, if Ozymandias’ absence mocks his decrepit presence, then Ozymandias—
as’ sculpted presence dismantles the artist’s attempt to subvert the system. As David Wells says, “precisely because of the survival of the sculptor’s work, the tyrant himself also continues to exist in the minds of contemporary observers” (1227). The existence of these two conflicting voices, then, upsets the supposed unity in the sonnet’s meaning. On the one hand, the sonnet expresses hopes in the subversiveness of art. The sculptor could interpret the king’s passions, stamp—or impress the Pharaoh’s fundamental nature onto stones—and mock the Pharaoh’s vainglorious words. On the other hand, the sonnet expresses doubts about art’s function in history. For, though he mocked the Pharaoh, he perpetuated the Pharaoh’s memory and fell to the same decay as Ozymandias. Consequently, while not a complete expression, “Ozymandias” evinces Shelley’s skeptical idealism at work.

But Shelley’s skeptical idealism does not stop there. In fact, by uncovering these two conflicting interpretations, one can see them inform a third, namely, the sonnet’s creative form. For precisely because of the poem’s disunity, a paradox emerges: in the chaos, in the conflict, in the disorder, the poet creates his most radical work. The poet’s words, sounds, sonnets may be as frail as the tyrant’s. But that doesn’t stop the poet from creating the sonnet; indeed, it motivates him. For by demonstrating the weakness internally, the sonnet imitates the tyrant’s instability and transience in its own limited and unstable medium. As the sculptor “mocked” the Pharaoh, one can see the sonnet simultaneously imitating and mocking the Pharaoh’s ironic decay.

This paradox goes even deeper. As in the fifth stage, the era of reconstruction, the sonnet rebuilds the sculptor’s decrepit statue, indeed, reasserts the political statement. Although the statue, and the sonnet, are subject to decay, such knowledge does not stop the poet from subverting the tyrant, from all systems of tyranny. As Shelley himself makes clear in A Defense,

Poetry makes us the inhabitants of a world to which the familiar world is a chaos. It reproduces the common universe of which we are portions and percipients, and it purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being….It creates anew the universe after it has been blunted in our minds by the recurrences of impressions blunted by reiterations (866).

In fact, as Michael O’Neill points out, the sonnet’s unconventional form and rhyme articulate this newness. While acting as a Petrarchan sonnet, “Ozymandias’ defies tradition: the rhyme scheme abab acdc edef efef upsets the expectation of abab cdcd efef efef (O’Neill 330-331). But notice where the sonnet departs from the Petrarchan tradition: the second quatrains, that is, the quatrains where the sculptor, the collapsed, and the ambiguous phrase “which yet survive” are given (Wells 1228). Thus, in this quatrains, the instability of the tyrant, the sculptor, and the sonnet are all expressed at once. In other words, the sonnet criticizes art and tyranny
while simultaneously altering its own form. “Implicitly, then, the poem is making a meta-poetic statement about its own longevity which may exceed that of both Ozymandias and the sculptor who preserved his memory, but paradoxically may ultimately itself also be subject to decay” (Wells 1228). The sonnet, then, does something new, while articulating the irony of something old.

In fact, these unities and disunities are what make Shelley’s imagination radical. Sure, he was after the fundamental nature of humanity amid tyrants and oppression. But he was not after a dogma or a creed. “No poet was more aware than Shelley of the dangers of closure. No poet therefore clung more tenaciously to the ‘Abysm’ or ‘void’ as a perpetual opening into nothingness….He knew the apparent limitations of arming himself with metaphor to fight an enemy whose metaphors had turned to stone” (Woodman 170-171). Art, like tyranny, decays over time; its metaphors, once mediators between imagination and reality, could just as easily turn into stone. A new movement, then, was needed to rekindle the fire of an era’s spirit, not as a repeat or imitation of a previous paradigm, but as an improvement on its shortcomings and the failings of the present, as Shelley says in his Defense of Poetry, “but every great poet must inevitably improve upon the example of his predecessors in the exact structure of his peculiar versification” (860).

Improving upon the errors of the past naturally leads one to the character of Prometheus in Prometheus Unbound. Of most importance is the character of Prometheus, for this character is the embodiment of the radical imagination. In Aeschylus’ original tale, Prometheus transgressed Zeus by giving humanity fire; as a consequence, Zeus bound Prometheus to a rock and sent an eagle to dig out his heart every day. Prometheus Unbound, however dependent on this story, is not so much a re-mythologizing of Aeschylus’ story as a philosophical and psychological exploration into the state of being unbound, of being able to contemplate metaphysical questions without the limitations imposed by religious fundamentalism (Sperry 69). Thus, Prometheus’ character is both, paradoxically, the connection between the divine and humanity and the liberator of humanity from the oppression of divine tyranny. Perhaps the most articulate humanist of this idea, Paulo Freire, illuminates Prometheus’ character well when he says:

Because it is a distortion of being more fully human, sooner or later being less human leads the oppressed to struggle against those who made them so. In order for this struggle to have meaning, the oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity (which is a way for creating it), become in turn oppressors of the oppressed, but rather restores of the humanity of both” (44).

In fact, the connection between Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Shelley’s Prometheus Unbound can be more deeply wrought. For Freire fought against the
same subtle oppression characterized by Prometheus: dehumanization. “Dehumanization,” says Freire, “which marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also (though in a different way) those who have stolen it, is a distortion of the vocation of becoming more fully human” (44). To dehumanize, then, is to deny humans access to that which completes them, feeds them, keeps them conscious of the real world. Dehumanization, in essence, precludes the ideals of Platonic philosophy, of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, of the French Revolution, and, indeed, much of humanist literature. “Submerged in [the oppressor’s fatalistic] reality, the oppressed cannot perceive clearly the ‘order’ which serves the interests of the oppressors whose image they have internalized” (Freire 62).

At first, Prometheus allowed Jupiter to dehumanize him, not just by the “bright chains” that ate “with their burning cold into my bones,” nor by “Heaven’s winged hound” tearing up Prometheus’ heart, but by the unacknowledged shift in Prometheus’ spirit. One can perceive the shift in the Phantasm, which comes to remind Prometheus of the words he said to Jupiter at the beginning of the champion’s blight:

Phantasm: But thou who art the God and Lord—O thou
Who fillest with thy soul this world of woe,
To whom all things of Earth and Heaven do bow
In fear and worship—all-prevailing foe!
I curse thee! let a sufferer’s curse
Clasp thee, his torturer, like remorse,
Till thine infinity shall be
A robe of envenomed agony;
And thine Omnipotence a crown of pain
To cling like burning gold round thy dissolving brain.

In this paroxysm of pain and torture, Prometheus curses Jupiter, spites him, hates him. One may think his attitude reasonable, since Jupiter did tie Prometheus to a rock. But how Prometheus changes from these brutal emotions points to something greater.

Prometheus: Were these my words, O Parent?
Earth: They were thine.
Prometheus: It doth repent me: words are quick and vain;
Grief for awhile is blind, and so was my mind.
I wish no living thing to suffer pain.

In these three lines, often called the crux of the whole poem, Prometheus repents: despite Jupiter’s cruelty, Prometheus’ compassion for life persists. Prometheus will not absorb the cruelty of Jupiter, will not imitate the oppressive models of
some divine hegemony. He will not become, in turn, the oppressor. “The first act of *Prometheus Unbound*,” says Romantic scholar Stuart Sperry, “explores the way the Promethean spark, the enduring flame of self-assertion and self-respect, can retain a vital power after the fires of hatred and resentment that kindled it have consumed itself” (82). What Prometheus feels is **empathy**. Prometheus, bound to rock, bound to having his heart eaten out by an eagle, bound to the cruel pride of God, asserts his compassion for all living things, including Jupiter.

Disdain? Ah no! I pity thee.—What Ruin
Will hunt thee undefended through wide Heaven!
How will thy soul, cloven to its depth with terror,
Gape like a Hell within! I speak in grief,
Not exultation, for I hate no more
As then, ere misery made me wise.

As the rest of the drama plays out, this theme of compassion is compounded. For, though Jupiter is annihilated by the mysterious being Demogorgon in the third Act, Prometheus never reverts to cruelty.

Prometheus, then, symbolizes the radical imagination. For, like Prometheus, the radical imagination separates ideology from its status as unquestioned truth, opens dialogue with tradition, and articulates a newness, a love, for life. As the end of a known world implies the possibility of a new one, so, too, the possibility occasions new practices of poetry. The radical imagination, and the radical poetics that it generates, are at once **skeptical** of the world and **idealistic** toward a better one. And perhaps no Romantic poet articulated this paradox better than Shelley. “Shelley is an especially important poet for our time, so like his own, because of the vitality of his tested optimism. He confronted the modern crisis of doubt following the collapse of the old worldview and its attendant religious doctrines, and reaffirmed belief in the ability of liberated humanity to achieve, even through inevitable failure and suffering, the ideals it could achieve” (McNiece 8). As one who saw the gods failing in a time of crisis, Shelley articulates empathy amid dehumanization.

**The Modernist Imagination: Supreme Fictions and a Love for the Earth**

Though Percy was a self-acknowledged atheist, his verse manifests a mind moving toward something powerful, something beyond existence, something within the web of divine presence without the vigor of Calvinist theology or the ardor of religious fanaticism. No doubt, his imagination questioned reality; he was not satisfied with “cookbook” formulas that solved life’s mysteries, as his poem “Mount Blanc” shows.

The everlasting universe of things
Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves
Now dark—now glittering—now reflecting gloom—
Now lending splendour, where from secret springs
The source of human thought its tribute brings (1-5)

The “everlasting universe of things,” or the Power beyond Mount Blanc, “flows through the mind,” appearing, first as darkness, then as a glittering something, a reflecting gloom, a brighter light. Arriving “from the ice gulphs” of its mystical home, this Power’s existence evinces in an evanescence of poetic exploration. Sure, Shelley is indefinite, unclear, and uncertain about the Power’s essence, as “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” shows:

The awful shadow of some unseen Power
Floats though unseen amongst us (1-2).

But Mount Blanc clearly exists, and so does the Power behind it, despite the poet’s inarticulate expressions. It may be that the “gleams of a remoter world visit the soul in sleep,” or that the spirit fails when it looks upon Mount Blanc’s crags of dangerous sublimity, or that uncertainty and “awful doubt” girdle the poet’s mind. But they do not, however, preclude the existence of the Power in the poem, nor do they preclude the poet’s search for it. In fact, paradoxically, the doubt motivates the search.

The wilderness has a mysterious tongue
Which teaches awful doubt, or faith so mild,
So solemn, so serene, that man may be
But for such faith with nature reconciled (76-79).

The mention of reconciliation reminds one of Jeremiah, and, indeed, foreshadows Wallace Stevens. For Jeremiah’s faith in God, as Brueggemann deftly notes, was not motivated by proof or reason, but by questions concerning God’s reality. “Passion for ministry in Jeremiah is in part because of his readiness to let his spirituality take the form of theodicy” (Hopeful Imagination 22). There is, in fact, a reason Jeremiah is labelled a lunatic, a weeping prophet: he dialogued and argued with the supreme being of his poetry, Yahweh. “My heart is broken within me, I tremble in all my bones. I am like a drunken man overcome with wine—because of Yahweh and his holy words…” (The Jerusalem Bible 23:9). And elsewhere, “I did not sit in the company of merrymakers, nor did I rejoice; I sat alone, because thy hand was upon me, for thou hadst filled me with indignation. Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?” Then the lines that baffle systematic theologians: “Wilt thou be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail?” (Oxford Annotated Bible Jer. 15:17-18). God has become for Jeremiah a mi-
rage; failing to be the sustenance Jeremiah once thought he was, the prophet now questions who God is and what God’s promises are (Miller 698).

Opening the “God” question ignited Jeremiah and Shelley’s radical imaginations. In every era, certain poets rise to the task of opening this question, of challenging systems on their notions, and renewing life with something more spacious, more liberating, more vital. And for the twentieth century, that poet was Wallace Stevens. “Poetry is a search for the inexplicable,” he says in his aphoristic book, *Adagia*. (974). Certainly, Stevens was a radical, not so much for his life—which showed no revolutionary energy—for his political engagement—zero—but for his optimism toward renewal in a skeptical and disillusioned era. “To give a sense of the freshness or vividness of life is a valid purpose for poetry” (*Adagia* 972). As Jeremiah and Shelley were searching for the Power, Stevens, too, searched for meaning, for what he called nobility, in poetry. “After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life’s redemption” (*Adagia* 972).

Connecting Vico’s stages with Stevens is worth the endeavor, for like the previous two poets, the disillusionment of the twentieth century occasioned his radical verse. In fact, Stevens adds new light to the foregoing connection between Vico’s four stages and the engagement of the radical imagination. For, as he says in his essay, *The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words*, “It is the peculiarities of the imagination that it is always [reborn] at the end of an era. What happens is that it is always attaching itself to a new reality and adhering to it. It is not that there is a new imagination but that there is a new reality” (*Noble Rider* 977). In other words, the new reality, prompted by the collapse of the old, occasions, not a new imagination, but a new use of the imagination, indeed, a radical imagination. The pressures of reality—its conflict—successfully conclude one era and bring about another. But this new era does not simply arise on its own. Its rising, its renewal, is directly linked to the poet and visionary whose consciousness is fine-tuned to the crises at hand, whose imagination fights back apostasy and cynicism, whose will to oppose and create, to critique and imagine, to dismantle and construct opens the mind to new speculations. And when one reads Stevens’ poetry, he finds this kind of radical imagination at work: in a skeptical age of science and rationalism, Stevens’ supreme fictions reinvigorated the search for divinity, reincarnated the sublime in the world, and renewed talk about the imagination’s role in an era of conflict.

Stevens’ poetry, like so many Modernists and post-modernists, was influenced by the World Wars, as his essay *The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words* (1942) shows:

> For more than ten years now, there has been an extraordinary pressure of news….news, at first, of the collapse of our system, or call it, of life; then of news of a new world, but of a new world so uncertain that one did not
know anything of its nature….and finally news of war….little of what we have believed has been true (976).

In this new era of global strife, shattered economies, and great depressions, the systems of meaning that once informed reality failed. Stevens’ context of conflict, then, was not just exterior trauma, but religious doubt and existential wondering. For, inside the American mind, new ideas were making religious truths seem like delusional enigmas. For instance, in anthropology, E.B. Tylor (1832-1917) and James Frazer (1854-1941) argued that religions were developed forms of magic: afraid of what the wilderness might do, “savages” created religions to “control the elements” and silence fears of the unknown (Pals 38). Thus, they argued, religion was a primitive method of answering questions, a method adequately replaced by the precision and accuracy of science (Pals 44). Like Tylor and Frazer, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) viewed religion as anachronistic in an era of advanced scientific methods. In his books Totem and Taboo (1913) and The Future of Illusion (1927), Freud linked religions to superstitions and neurotic behavior with psychological science dislodged religious authority (Pals 68). In philosophy, too, religion was under attack: skepticism was intensified by Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), who declared in The Gay Science and Thus Spoke Zarathustra, “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him” (The Gay Science 90-91). Nietzsche’s philosophy, Freud’s psychology, Frazer and Tylor’s anthropology, as well as Einstein’s relativity theories, Marx and Engel’s economics, and a new awareness of world religions coalesced into an unprecedented agent of spiritual unrest.

If the Romantics emphasized personal freedom and imagination, then the Modern world emphasized noetic limitation and the unforeseeable effects of the unconscious. The Modernists reached a strange conclusion: one’s intentions are in fact a distortion, an illusion. For every clear intention—marrying, buying a home, eating a piece of cheese, finding a job—has an unspoken urging that really compels the person to start what he finishes. Though a person may not know this unspoken urging, nonetheless, it exists and it may contradict the clear intention. This discrepancy between subconscious reality and intention, belief and unintended urgings characterize this era’s most radical thinkers. Therefore, if the Romantics felt a “spirit of the age,” the twentieth century felt a spirit of disenchantment and dislocated beliefs. Though religions still existed, the rise of rational science and objective methods clashed with the truths claimed by Christianity. Belief in God, these thinkers argued, was irrational and ungrounded.

Like these thinkers, for Stevens, the moment religion stopped conveying meaning was the moment religion needed replacing. Unlike them, however, Stevens was dissatisfied with the scientific method replacing the search for God. “People doubt the existence of Jesus,” Stevens says in an early letter to his wife, Elsie Moll. “But I do not understand that they deny God.—I think everyone admits that in some form or other.—The thought makes the world sweeter even if God
be no more than the mystery of life” (140). The desire for meaning, indeed, the need for belief still existed, despite the impotence of religious symbols, as Stevens says in a later letter (1940): “If one no longer believes in God (as truth), it is not possible merely to disbelieve; it becomes necessary to believe in something else” (370). It was the vehicle, then, that needed replacing, not the spirit. For though the metaphor of life’s meaning—God—once delivered vitality, for Stevens, God’s absence in the twentieth century activated a new reality. “My trouble and the trouble of a great many people, is the loss of belief in the sort of God in Whom we were all brought up to believe” (Letters 348). And for Stevens, this new reality was a supreme fiction.

“The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly” (Adagia 973). Indeed, one may find Stevens odd or boisterously self-contradicting when he suggests “something” exists in the “nothingness that is” (“The Snow Man” 247). Yet this tension between the cosmic absence of God and an earth fraught with beauty led Stevens to the grand paradox, the supreme fiction, that “the imagination is the faculty by which we import the unreal into the real” (Beckett 39). In other words, things certainly exist, but meaning and divinity are less an innate property then a fusion with the imagination. And though many of his poems explore this paradox, “Sunday Morning” and “The Idea of Order at Key West” elaborate this strange belief as an incarnation of the sublime.

“Sunday Morning,” says J. Hillis Miller, “is Stevens’ most eloquent description of the moment when the gods dissolve. Bereft of the supernatural, man does not lie down paralyzed in despair. He sings the creative hymns of a new culture, the culture of those who are ‘wholly human’ and know themselves” (Miller). Since Stevens is a philosophical poet, one can perceive Miller’s statement—what one may call “the irony of the supernatural”—through a syllogism:

1. A transcendental god implies a god of immaterial essence

2. Knowing only the physical world, humans cannot relate to the immaterial, nor can they articulate its characteristics.

3. Thus, humans cannot relate to or describe a transcendental god.

The problem, then, is how—in an era of science—to relate to the spiritual without falling into the trap of transcendence. The lead characters in the poem, the woman and the poet, beautifully articulate this concern. Here one finds the woman relaxing with her “complacencies,” her dressing gown, belated morning coffee, oranges, sunny chair, and green cockatoo rug. Opposed to the busyness of conventional churchgoers, on this Sunday morning, procrastination is a virtue. But the loveliness of the morning complicates when the “old catastrophes” and the
“ancient sacrifice” of Christ re-emerges in her day-dreaming. The dark encroachment of Christ’s sacrifice (an ironic reversal of Easter) makes the objects of procrastination seem less divine. Their cinematic vividness disappears, as they begin to appear as “some procession of the dead.”

The narrator then asks: “Why should she give her bounty to the dead?” The implied problem begins to arise: why should her oranges and green cockatoo rug be dead and spiritless? Although it seems silly or childish, this question contains the weight of modern doubts and skepticism. As science continually focused on the real and physical, as the scientific method sought empirical data and rational conclusions, as theorists in all fields looked for objective answers to once spiritualized questions, religious texts became less valuable and less meaningful. Consequently, religious truths and symbols suffered. The question, then, why should she give her bounty to the dead, was very much alive, not just for devout Christians trying to practice asceticism, but for everyday people living in a seemingly dead and uninspired world. The next question better exhumes the irony:

What is divinity if it can come
Only in silent shadows and dreams? (17-18).

The poet now questions the limitation implied by the supernatural. If the divine cannot be found but in slippery forms—in “silent shadows” and “dreams”—then what exactly is it? For the poet, this question of essence (of ontology) easily shifts into a question of belief (of epistemology): how do we know the divine if not through the natural world? As Stevens later articulates in a letter, “The trouble with the idea of heaven is that it is merely an idea of the earth. To imagine a heaven that is what heaven ineffectually strives to be” (Letters 464). Where the poet takes this question next is quite strange.

Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,
In pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else
In any balm or beauty of the earth,
Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven?
Divinity must live within herself: (19-23).

In this short section, in these loaded lines, the poem shifts brilliantly in thought. No longer is the poet talking about the essence of divinity or the question of belief, but the possible hybrid of the divine and the human. The poet wants everyday objects—pungent fruit, green wings, the comforts of the sun—to be as meaningful and as vitalizing as “thoughts of heaven,” as Christian doctrine, as religious symbols. Intuitively, one believes the divinity and the woman are separate entities. Yet the poet suggests an alternative idea: the one lives inside the other as a baby lives inside a pregnant mother. The simile is more explanatory than connective: for
like the incarnate God in the virgin Mary, the divinity resides in the woman. Lines 36-38 communicate this humanizing of the sublime:

Until our blood, commingling, virginal,
With heaven brought such requital to desire
The very hinds discerned it, in a star (36-38)

The star, an allusion to the shepherds who saw the star of Bethlehem, is at once a physical perception and a religious symbol, a reality and an act of the imagination. Before these lines, the poet introduces Jove, the supreme and capricious god of the sky, who has not experienced human dependency or limitation, nor has he felt human pleasures and freedom. Therefore, until his substance mingled with the blood of humans—another allusion to Christ’s incarnation—Jove was too immaterial to be relatable. The irony of transcendence is now clearly expressed: though seemingly infusing reality with meaning, the transcendence is ineffable and utterly estranged from human knowledge and contact. The solution, then, is not just a natural religion, but a god with flesh. This sounds very Christian, but it has its differences. And as the poem progresses, these differences begin to arise.

She says, “But in contentment I still feel
The need of some imperishable bliss” (61-62)

In contentment, the need for something immaterial, for something perfect, still exists. How Stevens responds to her anxiety has baffled readers and critics alike:

Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,
Alone, shall come fulfillment to our dreams
And our desires (63-65).

Death is not the enemy to be defeated, not the last obstacle to be overcome, but the consummation of beauty in the flesh. Death is beauty’s mother: the one conceives the other. Quite counter-intuitive to most religions and cultures, the narrator shifts the woman’s perspective: that which perishes is most beautiful, most real, most sublime.

[Death] makes the willow shiver in the sun
For maidens who were wont to sit and gaze
Upon the grass, relinquished to their feet.
She causes boys to pile new plums and pears
On disregarded plates. The maidens taste
And stray impassioned in the littering leaves (70-75)
Though Steven’s early editor, Harriet Monroe, removed this passage from the first edition of the poem, Stevens replaced it in his volume _Harmonium_. For, as his letter to Monroe shows, Stevens saw these lines as vital to his new metaphor of death.

The words “On disregarded plates” in No. 5 are, apparently, obscure. Plate is used in the sense of so-called family plate. Disregarded refers to the disuse into which things fall that have been possessed for a long time. I mean, therefore, that death releases and renews. What the old have come to disregard, the young inherit and make use of. Used in these senses, the words have a value in the lines which I find it difficult to retain in any changes (183).

What Stevens says here is what has been said of the radical imagination: to *release* and *renew*. When the world falls into disuse after being inhabited for a long time, when Christianity falls into desertion after religious symbols are iterated to death from the pulpit, when life becomes essentially meaningless, conflict releases the mind (Vico’s fourth stage) and renews the imagination (the paradox). Death, conflict, crises, are at once the impetus for disillusionment and the grounds for the radical imagination. But what the poet suggests goes deeper than just renewal. The poet wants to *incarnate* the supernatural. In other words, when the stone rolls over the tomb, the body will not leave. Resurrection, the poem seems to imply, is an escapist thought, a way of displacing oneself from the earth, from its conflicts, from its beauty. The incarnation of the sublime, then, is imminent. Against the empiricists and scientists, the poet suggests the existence of something else, something divine. Against conventional Christian doctrine, however, the poet does not liken the divine to Platonic ideals, unchanging domains of perfection, hopes of another world. The poet enjoys *this* world, *this* life, the boughs that hang in waters high, the rivers that retreat to seas, the fruits that give sweet taste to the degree that they *perish*. The poet, then, is a poet of the earth. As Jeremiah’s radical imagination led him to renew his love for God, and as Shelley’s led him to renewed love for humanity, Stevens’ led him to a renewed love for the planet. “The great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of the earth remains to be written,” and indeed, in “Sunday Morning,” Stevens self-fulfilled his own poetic prophecy.

Death is the mother of beauty, mystical,  
Within whose burning bosom we devise  
Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly (88-90)

*Death is the mother of beauty*. As morbid as it sounds, this perplexing metaphor begs the question: if death is the mother of beauty, then who is its father? While
one shouldn’t read too deep for necrophilia, if death is likened to reality, then the father of beauty is the imagination. In this sense, the imagination and reality interconnect to produce orders of beauty. Like the Renaissance painters who likened beauty to mathematical precision, the beauty of the world is delivered through order. And no poem expresses this interaction better than “The Idea of Order at Key West.”

The intercourse of reality and imagination is the central motif in this tranquil meditation on a woman’s singing near the ocean. The woman sings beside the beach, but the song she sings is not a natural song. Though, scientifically, the woman’s voice and the ocean’s sounds are made through similar vibrations and wavelength manipulations, the poet discerns a difference in the woman’s song, a difference of order.

For she was the maker of the song she sang
The ever hooded, tragic-gestured sea
Was merely a place by which she walked to sing.
Whose spirit is this? We said, because we knew
It was the spirit that we sought and knew
That we should ask this often as she sang (15-20)

Her voice contrasts with the natural world, for as the maker, the singer enhances the sounds of the “inhuman” ocean. Her song was more than the water lapping, more than the mechanics of her own voice, more than the “meaningless plunging” of the ocean. Not “more” as in heightened amplitude, or elongated melody, but more as in meaning. Her imagination makes life beautiful, makes meaningless reality into a meaningful order. Thus, the singer avoids nihilism and scientific positivism by singing: she selects elements from nature and arranges them in such a way as to make something new, something vibrant. “Poetry rearranges the arrangement of things that we find in the world and deepens it, making it more intense and profound. Enchanting should be understood literally, as singing the world into existence” (Critchley 57). The question that the poet asks, “whose spirit is this?” is the question guiding the poem to its conclusion: “Who knows. But it’s beautiful.”

The poet never supplies a definite answer to this question. And that’s partly his point. Reality is an open medium by which the imagination colors and manipulates, objectifies and rearranges, perceives and orders. The source of the woman’s spirit is an open question; the “genius of the ocean” is beyond human perception. Both of these enable the poet to speculate and create. Like the poet and sculptor in “Ozymandias;” disorder in reality occasions ordered beauty. The imagination, along with the will of the artist, imbues reality with its meaning, with its value, with its order. As such, the order can be changed, but the order exists there nonetheless. As Stevens says in a letter, “In ‘The Idea of Order at Key West,’ life has ceased to a matter of chance. It may be that every man introduces
his own order into life about him and that the idea of order in general is simply what Bishop Berkeley might have called fortuitous concourse of personal orders. But still there is order….I don’t think that is a fixed philosophical proposition that every man introduces his own order as a part of a general order” (293). The “Idea of Order at Key West,” then, along with “Sunday Morning,” combine to articulate the idea of supreme fictions, that is, the idea of imbibing reality with beauty and meaning by endlessly arranging and rearranging, by endlessly creating, by endlessly making poetry.

Though his stance toward religion was ambiguous, Wallace Stevens articulated a sort of new divinity by grounding it in the flesh. Indeed, as Jeremiah made God real again through the new covenant, and as Shelley made the ideals real again through nonviolent revolution, Stevens makes the sublime real by removing it from a transcendental state and imputing it back into the natural world. Like the poets before him, Stevens used the radical imagination to perceive the fundamental essence of reality, which led him back to the imagination.

**Conclusion: The Radical Imagination in the 21st Century**

In the year the United States entered World War II, Stevens wrote “On Modern Poetry,” a poem that, like most of his poetry, reflects on the act of making a poem. In “On Modern Poetry,” a paradigm of the radical imagination emerges:

The poem of the mind in the act of finding
What will suffice. It has not always had
To find: the scene was set; it repeated what
Was in the script (1-4).

Immediately, the poet distinguishes two poetics, the one of “the mind in the act of finding” and the one of “the script.” The poet does not favor one over the other; rather, choosing a poetic depends on the scene’s mutability. One can, as David Walker does, interpret the scene as reality and the script as belief. In this sense the “scripted” poets reinforce the beliefs of an era (Walker 48). But when the scenes change, the script no longer reflects the right landscapes, characters, or cultures. The mind, then, must create the script to suffice, must make the supreme fiction that best dialogues with reality.

Then the theatre was changed
To something else. Its past was a souvenir (5-6).

Souvenirs objectify memories. They maintain the existence of meaningful moments through things seemingly unrelated, or partially related, to the thoughts they represent. Likewise, a poem can be a souvenir, reminding readers of a past world, like a black and white television program; however, the modern poem, the
poem without a script, the poem of the radical imagination, reflects not the past but the changing theater. Thus, the modern poem does not objectify, but reflects this changing world. Like the sculptor in “Ozymandias,” the modern poet does not let mutability preclude his poetic articulation of a new direction. For every era faces Vico’s prophecy: nations destroy nations, universes engulf worlds, new realities disintegrate old ones. The modern poet, then, must rediscover meaning, must re-articulate newness.

It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place. It has to face the men of the time and to meet The women of the time. It has to think about war And it has to find what will suffice. It has To construct a new stage (7-11).

The modern poem has to construct a new stage. Indeed, in every era, in every context of conflict, the radical imagination must emerge to reconstruct the broken fragments of meaning and revitalize the search for the divine. As shown in Jeremiah, the radical poets must create fresh metaphors—a living language—that makes God real again. Like Shelley, the ideals of the era should not die when experience and skepticism emerge; rather, they should combine. And like Stevens the radical poet must love the earth by becoming, not an exile, but a citizen to its new reality. Each of these poets operated in the fourth Viconian stage, the era of destruction and disenchantment. But these poets didn’t stop at disillusionment, nor did they simply “move on” to different places. They re-imagined life underneath new realities; they abandoned old modes of reasoning for new paradigms of thought. They searched for new vehicles to convey the divine’s presence. Though differing in belief and context, these poets are in the tradition of the radical imagination.
Works Cited


